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Language Difficulty Ranking

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has created a list to show the approximate time you need to learn a specific language as an English speaker. After this particular study time you will reach "Speaking 3: General Professional Proficiency in Speaking (S3)" and "Reading 3: General Professional Proficiency in Reading (R3)"



Please keep in mind that this ranking only shows the view of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and some language students or experts may disagree with the ranking.

If there is a language in this list you would like to learn and it is in a high difficult category, don't let this stop you from learning it. Even if they are ranked as difficult, it does not mean that they are impossible to learn and maybe it is not hard for you at all.

Category I: 23–24 weeks (575–600 hours)
Languages closely related to English

[Afrikaans](#)
[Danish](#)
[Dutch](#)
[French](#)
[Italian](#)

[Norwegian](#)
[Portuguese](#)
[Romanian](#)
[Spanish](#)
[Swedish](#)

Category II: 30 weeks (750 hours)
Languages similar to English

[German](#)

Category III: 36 weeks (900 hours)
Languages with linguistic and/or cultural differences from English

[Indonesian](#)
[Malaysian](#)

[Swahili](#)

Category IV: 44 weeks (1100 hours)
Languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English

[Albanian](#)
[Amharic](#)
[Armenian](#)
[Azerbaijani](#)
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[*Finnish](#)
[*Georgian](#)
[Greek](#)
[Hebrew](#)
[Hindi](#)

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Language Guide

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Category V: 88 weeks (2200 hours)

Languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers

[Arabic](#)[Cantonese \(Chinese\)](#)[Mandarin \(Chinese\)](#)[*Japanese](#)[Korean](#)

* Languages preceded by asterisks are usually more difficult for native English speakers to learn than other languages in the same category.

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40 Comments (and 9 trackbacks)

#1 by Marion Matte on November 4 – 8:14 pm



Great list! thats exactly what I was looking for!

#2 by Marcell on December 24 – 12:38 pm



Hi, this list is very accurate, I live in South Africa, here are many languages, but Xhosa and Zulu should be under the Category 1, its really not that difficult, my mother tongue is Afrikaans, very easy too!! At the moment im learning Tagalog, if anyone have any suggestions, i'll gladly accept them.

Ty

#3 by jack on February 16 – 7:05 am



Very helpful list, but why is German on its own. I know German is not that linguistically close to English (despite popular opinion that it is), but it's not that far away either.

#4 by Tanja on February 16 – 10:18 am



[jack](#) :

Very helpful list, but why is German on its own. I know German is not that linguistically close to English (despite popular opinion that it is), but it's not that far away either.

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I am a German speaker myself and it makes sense to me. German is between category 1 and 2. It is definitely harder than Italian or Spanish and thats why it take on average 150 hours more to learn.

Pingback: [Tweets that mention Language Difficulty List | Effective Language Learning -- Topsy.com](#)

Pingback: [The Breakdown on Language Learning Programs | chapuza:](#)

#5 by Joaquin Scott on September 3 – 2:08 am



I believe German should be in Category 1.

#6 by Ferenc Zopcsák on November 13 – 11:18 pm



Why isn't Hungarian in Column 3? Isn't its absolutely flexible word order hard to acquire for native speakers of English? No matter what the order of the words in a sentence is, it still remains grammatically correct, but may well mean completely different things! Not to mention the vowels that are unique to Hungarian such as "á,é,ó,ő,ű,ü,ú,í" and some consonants: "ty, gy, ny, sz, zs, dzs, dz, ly, cs" don't tell me it's as easy as Bulgarian or Icelandic... Vowel length is a distinctive feature, and should not be overlooked either.

Can anyone tell us the reasons why it is in Column 2? 😊

#7 by Brian on December 8 – 5:36 am



i think Japanese should be in category 2, even though it is completely different than English it is very simple and Thai should definitely be in category 3 because it is tonal which can be a very difficult concept to grasp if you speak English looks good other than that though

#8 by Nobody on December 18 – 2:55 pm



Umm...Japanese has a few thousand characters one has to learn, along with honorific language, and complex grammar. Thai has none of these. The tones do make it difficult though, which is why it is category 2 with a * as well

#9 by Tracy on December 22 – 5:06 am



Because I'm originally from the Caribbean, I found learning and repeating Japanese and understanding the basics was easy. I've yet to learn the kanjis and the grammar IS complex at times but with practice (of course) I'm sure I'll be able to master it eventually...hopefully 😊

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Pingback: [Nu, pogodi! – Introduction « Travels with Teango](#)

#10 by Cralls on January 14 – 6:43 am



Chinese is so overrated IMO. There are tones which are easily overcome. The pronunciations are easy and the grammar could not be simpler. There are very few similarities though and they think differently. And the dreaded characters aren't even that hard. Just study a few a day and they all build on each other so they get easier and easier.

#11 by Kartveli on February 14 – 2:22 am



Georgian, like the other Caucasian languages, is one of the most difficult languages in the world. It has a different alphabet, pronunciation is really tough and the Georgian verb is a nightmare:

"The Georgian verb is relatively complex. If we compare it to that of many of the more familiar languages – such as English, Spanish, French, and the like – we notice a number of significant differences. These including the following:

- the average number of morphemes (that is, basic grammatical units) per word is higher due to the process of agglutination (that is, word formation through combining sequences of elements, each with a distinctive role)
- verbs fall into a number of contrasting classes, based on their grammatical behavior and roles
- the familiar tenses (past, present, future, etc.) are replaced by what are known as 'screeves', which are characterized by more than just differences in the time reference
- the verb can include references to the subject and the direct and indirect objects, a characteristic known as polypersonalism as, for example, in the translation of 'I sent it to him', which is a single word in Georgian
- indirect objects can be marked as benefactors, possessors, and the like; this is known as 'version'
- subjects and objects are indicated in a more complex way through case marking
- there is a more precise distinction of direction with verbs of motion than in many of the more familiar languages, using verb prefixes known as directional preverbs.

As there are many exceptions to the general rules, one may sometimes encounter Georgian verbs which, in their detailed analysis, do not conform fully to models described here."

<http://www.armazi.com/georgian/>

Japanese is not difficult, mainly because it has few irregularities and it's easy to pronounce. As soon as you know the sentence patterns, you can put them to use easily. And learning hiragana, katakana and kanji is just a matter of drilling, which is not difficult, just time consuming and possibly boring.

So, I would suggest Georgian for category III and Japanese for category II.

Polish is very difficult to pronounce and grammar isn't so easy either. I'd say category III.
The Baltic languages, Finnish, Estonian, Armenian, Portuguese and Romanian should also move up a category.

And finally, I think German should be in category I.

Pingback: [Finnish is Perplexing...](#) « [Finnish from Afar](#)

#12 by steve on April 15 – 9:37 pm



for what its worth, as an English speaker I've put significant hours studying Japanese and Chinese, and here is my perspective:

Japanese is a nightmare for many reasons...one of which is when you learn a Kanji, you must learn it's onyomi and its kunyomi (Chinese and Japanese reading). One Kanji can have 2, 3, 4, 5 or more readings, and you just have to memorize which reading applies where (therefore you're not just learning the character in and of itself).

Japanese Keigo (honorific language) is also a tough nut to crack, so you really have to understand a lot of cultural nuances to get it right. At least it doesn't have a rich case system, and one doesn't have to worry about agreement with this-and-that, which eases the burden a little.

That's not saying much though. Japanese intermediate grammar is very difficult, and unfortunately Japanese Kanji are long-form Chinese characters...very tedious to write.

Chinese (Mandarin) is horrific in that it has a paltry work-to-results ratio: you have to worry about tones of course. If your tone is off, many Chinese speakers simply won't understand you. Dialects are troublesome (I don't mean Cantonese, MinNan, etc, which are their own languages, but rather northern, southern, Taiwan, central etc. dialects of Mandarin, which can differ significantly in pronunciation & impede listening comp).

People say you need to learn the 2,000 basic characters to read a newspaper. That is not fully true.

Just knowing these characters doesn't really help, because almost all Chinese words are made up of 2 characters. These 2,000 characters have formed in seemingly infinite combinations over thousands of years. Its daunting. I regularly find words in the dictionary that educated Chinese have never seen, but these still show up in books etc.

Chinese also has an amazing array of Idioms...4 character phrases that are not intuitive in meaning without historical background knowledge. Chinese has even more 4-character set phrases, which are often called idioms as well. There are endless amounts of them...more than the student could ever memorize, let alone use in conversation. The problem is in that these idioms and set phrases are common in conversation, news, etc. Chinese start learning these at an early age and they are essential to Chinese vocab. If you want to go anywhere in the language (eg progress into intermediate), you can't escape these little nightmares. they have a fixed expression for everything, and its a source for much frustration.

Chinese is one of the hardest languages in the world. I'm convinced of that. There is no alphabet to fall back on (an alphabet makes things so much easier). And Chinese is unique as you may be able hear a word but not necessarily be able read it, and vice-versa. If I had started with a romance language in the 1st place, I could have already progressed into one or more other romance languages by now, and be fluent in all of them. Not so in Chinese. Any intermediate and advanced student of this language (I am around a lot of them) truly feels like they're getting nowhere.

#13 by steve on April 16 – 12:23 pm



Here is a well-written and entertaining article by a Chinese expert from the University of Michigan...you may enjoy it:

'Why Chinese is so Damn Hard'

<http://www.pinyin.info/readings/texts/moser.html>

#14 by Unknown on May 10 – 8:59 am



I'm a native chinese speaker and it gives me a lot of advantages to because I listen to chinese (cantonese) since birth. I would advice learners to first learn the pinyin and then the characters. Hope u guys have fun

with it.

#15 by Pete on May 22 – 9:54 am



Hi Steve,

Thanks for recommending David Moser's article. I'm debating whether to shoot myself or just give up

Chinese altogether. All right, I can see that the writing system is hard (but kind of fun), but the grammar is easy, isn't it?

#16 by Judy Adkins Hill on May 29 – 6:19 pm



Navajo is not on this list, nor are Hopi or any of the Puebloan languages. I would be interested in where they rank in difficulty.

#17 by Bernard Leeman on June 11 – 9:04 pm



I did French and Latin O level at school requiring 3–5 years study but I learnt and passed Afrikaans O level in a month. Swahili and Japanese must be among the easiest languages to pronounce and it is a pity Japanese does not solely adopt romaji writing. Korean pronunciation is much more difficult than Japanese but the writing system is great.

A lot depends on course material and the culture of the target language. Esperanto is about world understanding and peaceful cooperation but more people relate to Klingon, which is concerned with intergalactic mayhem and blood oaths.

#18 by Bernard Leeman on June 11 – 9:09 pm



If China adopted widespread use of pinyin Chinese would quickly become a world language.

#19 by Geen on October 23 – 8:28 pm



Bernard:

“it is a pity Japanese does not solely adopt romaji writing”

How ethnocentric of you. Albeit being one of the most tedious and meticulous alphabets known to man, the mix of Kanji and Hiragana and Katakana in a given sentence in Japanese is a beautiful gem!

I think this report from the FSI is a comprehensive and large-scale and unbiased report from an institute carefully documenting how much time is required on average for native English speakers to reach proficiency in the most common languages. Their results shows that Japanese is the most difficult for native English speakers (followed by Chinese, Arabic, and Korean in similar level).

This was a large-scale and objective study, and so I will trust their results more than the opinions of some of these comments from people who have only studied one or two languages sporadically, and then possess a desire to claim that their target language should be placed in a more difficult level.

To that end, I have to agree with the comments from Steve on April 15. It just will be a challenge (or in his words a “nightmare”) for English native speakers to master the language of Japan. But it could be a rewarding one.

It does not mean, however, that the Japanese should have to change their language to make it easier for you to learn, and relegate it to one of the lower levels of difficulty.

#20 by Da on October 27 – 8:01 pm



Very interesting! Being my native language Spanish, I



studied German, Arabic and Japanese. I agree with the difficulty degree, but I might just add an asterisk to the Arabic language as well. The grammar (irregular past verbs), vocabulary, and pronunciation(!) makes it as difficult as Japanese.

Pingback: [First day of my journey | Passions](#)

#21 by Nicolas on November 9 – 8:38 pm



Hi there,
I am a native speaker of the Greek language. I really liked your website—it was what exactly I was looking—and I'd like to remark that Greek is not as difficult as rumours have it to be. Making an effort from anyone who is interested worths the try, it is one of the most historical and significant languages of the humanity.
Thank you

#22 by Bernard on November 25 – 11:33 pm



Ethnocentric to suggest the Japanese switch to Romaji ?
No, I am practical and anti-elitist. Japanese sounds are ideally suited to Roman letters. My language is Swahili and I'm glad we switched from Arabic script as did the Turks and that Oromo and Somali have adopted Roman script too instead of Ge'ez script. The Vietnamese education system has benefited from abandoning Chinese characters. I support the wonderful Korean alphabet. Japanese script is just inefficient.

#23 by john on December 1 – 4:59 pm



good list but im disappointed to see irish isnt here as its my first language... id say that it would be a category 3

#24 by ross papas on December 13 – 5:55 am



i am a greek australian and speak english ,greek,italian'
and am learning chinese mandarin (pu tong hua)
i can easily say thaT GREEK is a notoriously difficult language

i am finding mandarin easier than greek and i have been speaking greek for 35 years
greek words are long,gender specific, and extremely hard on the tonque
mandarin, i am finding is monosyllabic, with very simple grammatical rules.
yes, perhaps the character system is a big minus but for everyday conversation i would bet if you got 500 students and gave them 6 months at both, they would progress more in mandarin than greek
also greek has the worlds largest vocabulary with a staggering 5 million words

#25 by Sandra Carter on January 6 – 4:43 pm



Can anyone direct me to find out the number of hours required to learn English from various other languages. Most of the available information focuses on the difficulty for English speakers learning other languages.

I'm interested in finding out the number of hours needed for foreign speakers to learn English.

#26 by Steven on January 14 – 12:29 am



http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Language_Learning_Difficulty_for_English_Speakers

Hey John,

According to this link attached above, Irish is: "Category II: Languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English
44 weeks (1100 class hours)"

#27 by Kate on January 19 – 5:54 pm



Good list but I'm also wondering where Irish (Gaeilge) would fit into this. I have pretty good Irish and I love the language. It is so unique and bears almost no similarities to English or the romance languages. It is closely related to Scot's Gaelic and at a stretch you can find some similarities with Norwegian (viking influence maybe). I'd love to see how you'd categorize it.

#28 by himjl on February 28 – 7:58 pm



[Bernard](#) :

Ethnocentric to suggest the Japanese switch to Romaji ? No, I am practical and anti-elitist. Japanese sounds are ideally suited to Roman letters. My language is Swahili and I'm glad we switched from Arabic script as did the Turks and that Oromo and Somali have adopted Roman script too instead of Ge'ez script. The Vietnamese education system has benefited from abandoning Chinese characters. I support the

wonderful Korean
alphabet. Japanese script
is just inefficient.

Japanese script is beautiful and it would be tragic for them to ever change it (which they won't). The fact is that all languages have complicated aspects to them and while making them frustrating for non-natives to learn they enrich their respective languages. Is English really as good when you spell it phonetically? Should the Romance languages drop grammatical gender? Why don't we just all speak in computer code? There's only two characters, 1 and 0.

#29 by Isaac on February 29 – 10:07 am



[Bernard Leeman](#) :

I did French and Latin O level at school requiring 3–5 years study but I learnt and passed Afrikaans O level in a month. Swahili and Japanese must be among the easiest languages to pronounce and it is a pity Japanese does not solely adopt romaji writing. Korean pronunciation is much more difficult than Japanese but the writing system is great. A lot depends on course material and the culture of the target language. Esperanto is about world understanding and peaceful cooperation but more people relate to Klingon, which is concerned with intergalactic mayhem and blood oaths.

I understand what you say about Japanese, I live in Japan as a foreigner. However, Japanese simply can not be writing in Romaji or plain Kanji. It is too ambiguous and very difficult to understand. The Kanji system gives the kana meaning, so two words which are the same in sound have different kanji defining their meaning. Fortunately when speaking there are enough clues and relations to a word to be able to know what word is what but with writing this just wouldn't be possible.

#30 by Isaac on February 29 – 10:17 am



I can understand why Japanese is Cat 5.

As I've been living in Japan and have come to realize that the simple grammar is very easy to learn, however the sheer amount of words needed to speak at a fluent level as well as the more intermediate/advanced grammar can be a real nightmare sometimes. It is true that Japanese is very easy to pronounce but if you wish to produce a native or near native accent, it gets a lot more difficult. There are a lot of underlying tones that display politeness or emotion in a very indirect way, on top you have Keigo (Respectful language), Teneigo (Polite language) and just normal speech. All of which to an beginner can sound like a complete different sentence or subject.

This is putting aside their complicated writing system.

Pingback: [Goal Reached | Lucas and Naomi Lorenz](#)

#31 by Carol on March 22 – 1:38 pm



This seems pretty accurate to me. The asterisks in category iv, for example – Thai is harder than Tagalog, and they're both easier than Japanese. I was always told how hard German is, but it doesn't seem to be as difficult as many other languages.

#32 by Edward J. Cunningham on March 24 – 8:25 pm



@himji

I can give you one example of why the Japanese or Chinese (and probably both) should reform their alphabet. I heard the example of a Japanese or Chinese person who was proud to say that when they finished high school they were finally able to read a newspaper.

In not just America, but the Americas, Europe, or any other country that has an alphabetic system students are expected to read magazines and newspapers much, much earlier. I was expected to do reports based on newspapers and magazines when I was in junior high school, and we were also reading adult novels. In China or Japan, students still can't read any of those material at that stage?

If you cannot read a newspaper when you are in high school, something is wrong with your reading comprehension or something is wrong with your language.

#33 by David on April 26 – 9:36 am



Every time you learn another language, the list changes for you since now that second language will make it easier for you to learn other languages more closely related with it. I know it would take a lot of research

and data collecting but it would be cool if there was a program where you can enter all the languages you know, and it would compile your own personal list of which languages would be easiest for you to learn based on the ones you already know. Because this list is only for people who know English only.

#34 by Anna on May 24 – 3:23 am



[Ferenc Zopcsák](#) :

Why isn't Hungarian in Column 3? Isn't its absolutely flexible word order hard to acquire for native speakers of English? No matter what the order of the words in a sentence is, it still remains grammatically correct, but may well mean completely different things! Not to mention the vowels that are unique to Hungarian such as "á,é,ó,ö,ő,ú,ü,ű,í" and some consonants: "ty, gy, ny, sz, zs, dzs, dz, ly, cs" don't tell me it's as easy as Bulgarian or Icelandic... Vowel length is a distinctive feature, and should not be overlooked either. Can anyone tell us the reasons why it is in Column 2?

Hungarian is difficult, but it is not at all as difficult as e.g. Polish, or even English – children acquire Hungarian as their native language faster than English children acquire their language! And the word order is not infinitely flexible, as we both know. Not to mention the consonants: these are all very well utterable for any English speaker, as they have very close equivalents in English. Vowels can't cause much difficulty, either. And let's not forget that the writing system of Hungarian is probably the easiest, the most transparent.

#35 by Mark on June 25 – 4:11 pm



Many poster here seem to be misunderstanding the point of this ranking. Languages are ranked here not in terms of inherent difficulty, but by how long it takes a native English speaker to master them at a certain proficiency level. As for Japanese, while some aspects are not hard

(pronunciation, basic grammar rules) its writing system alone would qualify its place at the top of the list. It may be just a matter of time to learn all the characters and their usages, but that's entirely the point—it takes time.

Chinese may or may not be harder to learn than Russian, but it definitely takes more time.

#36 by louis on July 4 – 1:21 am



Hello, I speak tagalog and I don't think that it is that difficult. It has a lot of words derived from spanish (months,days of the week, telling time) and english since we (the pilippines) we're colonized by the spaniards and americans. Tagalog nowadays is much of a mix of different languages. However, the grammar is truly complicated.

I learned german and I think that it is very similar to english. It is also true that dutch is easier than german.

Chinese is very hard though its grammar is very easy. Japanese and Korean are easier than Chinese. Japanese is not that complex but I know that Asian languages are difficult for europeans and americans. Filipinos are already acquainted to koreans and japanese and that's why we don't find too much difficulty in learning these languages.

I recommend that you should study languages according to their language family. Romantic(Spanish, French, Italian etc) and Germanic (German, Norwegian, Danish etc) languages are the easiest ones for english speakers followed by Indo-european (greek, turkish) languages. Austronesian (tagalog, indonesia, malaysian, tetum etc) languages are easy too since they use roman scripts.

#37 by Andre on July 19 – 5:19 pm



[Marcell](#) :

I am also from South Africa and I now live in Cambodia where I have learnt to speak khmer. I think any language is easy to learn if you are surrounded by it. If I had spent my whole life speaking English and tried to learn Afrikaans without hearing it it would be difficult. If I had learnt Khmer in SA it would have been impossible. Hearing the language everyday and plunging into it is the way to go. I must say

though that as South African we are quite adaptable to languages having grown up with 11 of them. I now speak English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Sesotho and Khmer. If you want learn a language surround yourself with it
\\

Hi, this list is very accurate, I live in South Africa, here are many languages, but Xhosa and Zulu should be under the Category 1, its really not that difficult, my mother tounge is Afrikaans, very easy too!! At the moment im learning Tagalog, if anyone have any suggestions, i'll gladly accept them.
Ty

#38 by Tom on July 25 – 5:02 pm



I have had formal instruction in Latin, classical Greek and German and tried to teach myself to read some of the others from books. Remember: the FSI rankings are based on the difficulties Americans who are primary

English speakers have learning them. I agree with the list (including the placement of German and the Scandinavian languages, which are a snap to learn to read).

I would think Irish belongs in category 3 (it's far more difficult than German), but Welsh could be category 2 or even category 1, since the verb is easy and much of the modern vocabulary English respelled phonetically.

Pingback: [Korea, China or Taiwan? « Teach Asia](#)

#39 by Ronaldo on September 9 – 12:43 pm



I think it's quite lame and unsportsman-like (in dutch:flauw en onsportief) that you don't mention Esperanto as category 0. Learning it takes a mere 150 hours/ 6 weeks.

David (april 26), as far as I know the statistics are about native speakers of english that already speak one or more second languages

#40 by Philip Walkling on October 18 - 12:04 pm



I found German fairly easy from locals I never went to a language school (not fluent) but, Russian, I find difficult, but I'm getting there

Pingback: [Which language should I learn? « My Personal Reboot](#)

Pingback: [NaBloPoMo - 27/30 | jesspants](#)

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